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15 Minutes

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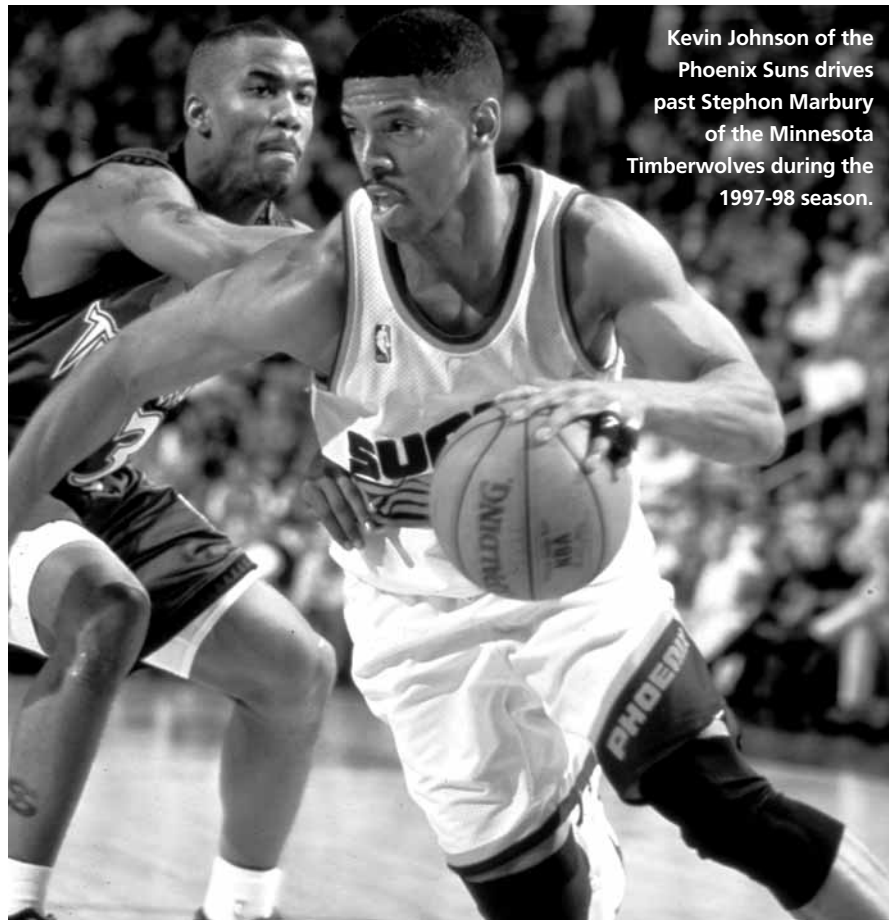
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15 minutes



Kevin Johnson of the Phoenix Suns drives past Stephon Marbury of the Minnesota Timberwolves during the 1997-98 season.

Kevin Johnson

SSIR Academic Editor Jim Phills sat down with former NBA superstar Kevin Johnson to discuss how he's revitalizing his old inner-city neighborhood

During his 12-year NBA career, first with the Cleveland Cavaliers and later with the Phoenix Suns, Kevin Johnson

was one of basketball's leading playmakers. The three-time NBA All-Star is one of only four players to average at least 20 points and 10 assists per game in three different seasons. In July 1989, shortly after the close of his second season, Johnson

returned to the inner-city Sacramento neighborhood where he grew up. He launched a nonprofit afterschool program housed in a portable classroom on the grounds of Sacramento High School. Today, Johnson's nonprofit has taken over the entire high school, and then some.

Johnson retired from basketball in 2000 and began focusing all of his discipline, energy, and intelligence on his 11-year-old nonprofit. Under his leadership, St. Hope has blossomed into a full-fledged community revitalization project: St. Hope Public Schools, a pre-K to 12 charter school district serving 2,000 students; St. Hope Neighborhood Corps, which trains young people to be community leaders; 40 Acres Art Gallery, which sponsors exhibitions, films, lectures, performances, and classes; and St. Hope Development Company, which has generated more than \$11 million in development projects, creating 14 businesses and 282 jobs.

JAMES A. PHILLS JR.: Was there a seminal moment in your life when the passion for the work that you're doing was ignited?

KEVIN JOHNSON: I remember sitting in an English class in college at UC Berkeley. I was a freshman – it was the first day of class and the teacher asked all the students if they knew what the word “euphemism” meant. There were 32 kids in the class and 31 raised their hands. I was the only one who didn't, and I was just baffled: “How could all these kids know what the word ‘euphemism’ meant?” Then one kid asked the teacher a question and I couldn't even understand the question. I just didn't think it was fair that 31 other people from all over the state – who went to different high schools – were exposed to that learning and I wasn't. It wasn't a cool feeling. So I said to myself that if I ever made it, I was going to go back to my commu-

nity because I didn't want other kids to have to feel that feeling.

How do you think about what's necessary to achieve educational reform in underresourced communities?

First, in order to really improve inner-city public education, economic development and community revitalization have to be a part of the equation. We have to make sure that businesses and services and private investment are all directed toward building inner-city communities. It has to be a holistic approach.

Second, every community, every child, and every family has to have access to a high-quality education. Public schools are not providing that across the board, while charter schools and others are providing families with a choice, and via that choice, competition. Competition is not a bad thing.

Third, I think a voice is missing from this fight – this movement that we're all participating in – and it's the grassroots voice of the students and families that are most disenfranchised. Until we get them to the table there are going to be inequalities, no matter how hard we try. But when their voice is loud and consistent, then real pressure will be put on the schools and the system that unfortunately strangles the opportunities that we so desperately want to have.

How do you affect the ability of those voices to be heard?

The impetus for our efforts [in the Oak Park area of Sacramento] was driven by the community. We were representing 28,000 people in the community who wanted change. We were out there fighting for their cause. Typically, you have 30 or 40 people show up at a local school

board meeting. When we took over Sacramento High School at our first school board meeting we had 250 people. That spoke volumes to the local school board, which was going back and forth on whether or not it was in favor of what we were doing. At our second board meeting, about 500 people showed up. That's what's missing in this battle: We need to really get our community and our grassroots folks at the table.

How do you get young people to become leaders?

We believe leadership is really about service. We want our young people to go to college and to give one year of their life afterward by coming back to their community or a community similar to theirs. It's people from those communities who are going to have the most lasting and sustaining impact. That's really our mission – getting our kids to understand that no matter how successful you are, you have to come back, because people in these communities need to see somebody who looks like them. They need to see somebody who walked the same streets that they walk, and they need somebody who can share those same stories.

Can you say more about the importance of economic development?

Our model is to focus on one geographic area in a particular community and get all the forces pointed in the right direction. We started a real estate development company, St. Hope Development Company, and we now have a couple of mixed-use commercial real estate projects in the Oak Park community. Our real estate development company has been very successful. I think we've developed nearly \$15 million worth of projects

in our community. Government dollars from local redevelopment agencies certainly played a role to help subsidize a project, but private investment has been a key as well. Our real estate development company has a business mentality. Its goal is to produce a profit, but it is a nonprofit, so all the revenue goes back into the company and the community. Fifty percent of the profit goes back into the real estate development company and the other 50 percent goes into the other work we're doing, whether it's public education or some of our art projects.

Why did you choose real estate as the engine of economic activity, as opposed to other types of ventures?

We felt that there needed to be something *tangible* that people could see. If you renovate a dilapidated building it symbolizes hope. The community knows that change is happening. Often in our community change is not visible. We felt that young people and families on the edge of hopelessness needed to see something real. Real estate was our way of doing projects that were very visible, high impact, that produced revenue and a bottom line, and that would allow us to do more work. When people walked by buildings that were once havens for drug lords, transients, or whatever else was going on in there that was undesirable, when they saw change taking place, they began to walk a little bit differently. Now these are places where people from our community have jobs. They can go to the local Starbucks now and have coffee in their community. There's an art gallery and a barbershop – again, industries that are often, unfortunately, absent in our communities.

Where did your views about the importance of integrating community economic development with education reform come from? What led you to see this challenge in that broad way?

I came from that community and that's what makes my lens a lot different from everyone else's. I didn't have a great public school education. If it weren't for sports I wouldn't have gone to college – especially a four-year college. And when I came back after being in the NBA, one of the first things I wanted to do was create an equal playing field. That meant that every kid in that community had to have access to a quality education.

But after not too long I realized that we're dependent on the government in many areas, and we don't think in terms of business and economic development, or really controlling our own fate. So rather than becoming overinvolved in community development and social service, we started a real estate development company so that our community could get a little bit more sophisticated when it came to pulling itself up by its bootstraps and really having a seat at the table. That has been very catalytic in our community, but it was a paradigm shift that had to take place in our community.

The way you talk about this evokes the notion of "social entrepreneurship." Is that label part of your identity? Has it influenced or been helpful in the work that you are doing?

It depends on what circle I'm in. Certainly, what we're doing is social entrepreneurship, and in some circles that's relevant. If I'm in another circle, then we're often seen as a charter management organization. If I'm in



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Sacramento, which unfortunately is not quite as sophisticated along these lines, I am just a businessman who's invested in his urban community. So the relevance of the label depends on the context.

What do you see as the role of celebrity in philanthropy and activism? Could you be doing what you're doing if you weren't a famous athlete?

In my case it definitely helps. However, I would challenge the notion that I couldn't do it if I were not an athlete. The doors wouldn't, perhaps, be as readily opened, but in our country we respect and admire results – people who are getting it

done. Around the country the athlete thing often gets in the way, unfortunately. A lot of communities and people who want to see change think that we as athletes are the saviors of inner-city communities, and I don't think that's the case. There are only 435 professional basketball players and none of them are the richest people in this country. There are many more people in different cities and communities that can have a much larger impact if they want to be engaged. The athlete thing or the celebrity status is great if you can use it, but that's not where I recommend putting all our eggs.

You have talked about the importance of accountability, measuring performance, and commitment – these sound a lot like the principles of competitive athletics. Do you see a connection between how you think as a businessperson, an educator, and a nonprofit executive and the lessons that you've learned as a college and professional athlete?

Sports and business have a very strong relationship. In the world of athletics there's a burden of accountability. Every day you're written about, so you either succeed or you don't on a daily basis. It doesn't matter what you did two or three days before. That kind of accountability is just par for the course when you play sports.

But in the educational arena, test scores come about twice a year, then you implement something, and that's another year. You don't have the kind of constant assessment of real performance that you have in the world of athletics. Bringing that accountability into the arena of education has been really helpful. □